# MILTON'S MEDIEVAL BRITISH READINGS

BY

CONSTANCE NICHOLAS

A.B., Carthage College, 1935
A.M., University of Illinois, 1936

## AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1951

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Perhaps there should be some explanation of the title of this dissertation, *Milton's Medieval British Readings,* although the words *medieval* and *British* are, I believe, used in the accepted sense. *Medieval* here indicates the period of time extending from the fall of Rome to the first real beginnings of the Renaissance in Britain at the end of the fifteenth century. *British* is employed with the modern meaning of pertaining to the British Isles. Of course, on occasion it is necessary to apply *British,* in a restricted sense, to those Celtic inhabitants who were later called foreigners, or Welsh, by their Teutonic invaders. *British* does not apply to the language, for the learned writings of this period in the British Isles are largely, as might be expected, in Latin. Among Milton's medieval British readings, only a few works, for example, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* some poetry, and some legal books, were written in English or French.

My purpose in this study is to discover just what Milton read of the works that had been written in the Middle Ages by British writers. The conclusion to which my investigation has led me is that Milton was, all things considered, a very well read man in medieval British literature. A list of the medieval British writers that we have evidence he read is quite impressive for one who was not a professional antiquarian and whose literary interests were chiefly classical. Some thirty writers and works in history, poetry, theology, and law might be counted: Gildas, Bede, Nennius, Asser, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* Ethelwerd, Marianus Scotus, Anselm, Florence of Worcester, Eadmer, Simeon of Durham, William of Malmesbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Henry of Huntingdon, Aelred, Roger of Hoveden, Roger of Wendover, Matthew paris, Bracton, the *Fleta,* the *Mirror of Justices,* the *Modus Tenendi Parliamentum, Piers Plowman,* Chaucer, Gower, Ingulf, Matthew of Westminster, Brompton, Hardyng, and Fortescue. In almost every instance, Milton's judgment of

these writings shows a good background as well as literary acumen.

The *History of Britain* represents the greatest amount of Milton's reading in British medieval writers. Necessarily, then, a large proportion of this study is devoted to the evidence in that work. It is notable that, in preparation for his history, Milton neglected no important authority for the period he was covering and appraised most of his sources with justice.

Milton's use of Nennius is one example of his search for primary materials. Professor Harry Glicksman, on page 106 of his article on "The Sources of Milton's *History of Britain*," makes this observation:

> It was largely to Usher, though in part also to Camden and Speed, that Milton seems to have owed his knowledge of the early British chronicler Nennius, whose **Historia**, which did not appear in print until 1691, he used freely.

If Professor Glicksman means that Milton learned of the existence of Nennius from Ussher, Camden, or Speed, he is very probably right. Or it is even true that much of what Milton used from Nennius was read first in Ussher, Camden, or Speed. But this reading in Ussher, Camden, and Speed was not the full extent of Milton's reading of Nennius's *Historia Britonum*. Milton must have read some manuscript or manuscripts of Nennius's history (since it was not available in print), for the *History of Britain* shows a first-hand acquaintance with Nennius. He must have read them before 1645 when he began the *History of Britain*, and memories of them were still fresh when he was writing the *Pro Populo* in 1651. There are several pieces of evidence, both external and internal, which point to the Cambridge manuscripts Ff.1.27 (twelfth century) and C.C.C.139 (thirteenth century) as possibilities for the manuscript or manuscripts that Milton used.

This dissertation represents an attempt to learn exactly what Milton read of works by medieval British writers. The evidence has been found in Milton's writings. In no sense is

it possible to say that all Milton's medieval British readings have been discovered. Milton may have read many works in this division of literature of which no traces appear in his writings. For example, we know from Edward Phillips's life of his uncle that Milton had a thorough knowledge of a famous textbook of the Middle Ages compiled by an Englishman. In Phillips's life of Milton, there is a description of the curriculum which he and his brother followed under Milton's tutelage after Milton returned from Italy in 1639: "an Introduction into several Arts and Sciences, by reading *Urstisius* his Arithmetick, *Riffs* Geometry, *Petiscus* his Trigonometry, *Joannes de Sacro Bosco de Sphaera.*" Joannes de Sacro Bosco (or John of Holywood) was born at Holywood, Yorkshire, in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. He condensed the astronomical knowledge of his day, chiefly of Arabic origin, in his *De Sphaera,* which long remained the standard textbook of Ptolemaic astronomy. *Paradise Lost,* of course, reveals Milton's knowledge of both the Ptolemaic and of the then new Copernican systems, but an examination of Milton's writings does not uncover any clue to his knowledge of this particular work.

However, Milton discloses in his writings an acquaintance with a wide range of the early literary production of the British Isles. The *History of Britain,* the *Commonplace Book,* the *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio, The Reason of Church Government, Of Reformation Touching Church Discipline in England, Animadversions upon the Remonstrant's Defence against Smectymnuus, An Apology against a Pamphlet Called a Modest Confutation,* and other compositions show that Milton's readings among British writers of the medieval period were varied and substantial.

## VITA

Constance Nicholas was born at Springfield, Illinois, on September 15, 1913, the daughter of the Reverend William Henry and Bertha Boehmig Nicholas. She attended the Springfield public schools and was graduated from Springfield High School in 1930. She was graduated with honors from Carthage College in 1935. Receiving the fellowship given to a member of the year's graduating class selected by the faculty, she enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Illinois in the fall of 1935. The Master of Arts degree was conferred upon her in June, 1936. From 1936 to 1942, she taught successively in the high schools at Carthage and Princeton and in the high school and junior college at La Salle, Illinois. Since 1942 she has been an assistant in English at the University of Illinois while working toward the doctorate.

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